

The Bystander

Getting aluminum plant

By Mel Ruder
editor emeritus

This is a good time to review the history of Montana's only aluminum production plant. There's concern that economic conditions in the industry worldwide along with a marked increase in power rates are reducing employment at the Columbia Falls plant to 563.

It is important for the Montana economy to continue aluminum and lumber production jobs. Living in this scenic area of the great-out-of-doors is wonderful, but to be kept in mind is many jobs in recreation tend to be low pay.

I wrote a Bystander column for the Sept. 18, 1985 *Hungry Horse News* that traced the the history of the aluminum plant. The column started: Of much importance to the Flathead is continuance of the Columbia Falls aluminum plant.

The column continued: R.O. Anderson, ARCO chairman, his advisors and others are to be commended for efforts to keep the aluminum plant from going the way of the mines at Butte and smelters at Anaconda and Great Falls.

Hungry Horse News stories told of progress by Brack Duker, former ARCO vice president who engineered the sale by ARCO at a nominal price. Key factors include area support Governor Ted Schwinden's advocacy and state Board of Investments \$8 million loan plus \$2 million from private banks to provide working capital. Cheaper power inducement came from Bonneville Power Administration, but not enough.

Let's hope what now develops is best possible for the Flathead and especially for plant workers and their families.

The 1985 Bystander had this comment. This is a good time for an editor emeritus to review past events.

The Flathead shouldn't forget anxiety of 1951-52 when economic slump was indicated following completion of Hungry Horse Dam.

At the Aug. 15, 1955 dedication of a new aluminum plant, Roy H. Glover, chairman of Anaconda's board of directors, said in his address: "Every possible political string was pulled in an effort to prevent construction of the new Anaconda Aluminum Co. plant.... finally President Harry S. Truman intervened and direct development of the plant permitted to proceed. "Glover reviewed difficulties of establishing an aluminum plant in Montana and keeping Hungry Horse power in the state. (Congressman Mike Mansfield was most helpful.)

A 1993 comment is to not forget Hungry Horse Dam and BPA were major factors in bringing the aluminum plant with its employment. Libby Dam from the Montana standpoint created construction jobs and helped recreation.

The 1985 Bystander continued with comment of industrial survival in the Flathead needs support of the national government and its agencies.

Plant history includes May 10 and 11, 1950 when Harvey Machine Co., Torrance, Calif., acquired options with intent to build a plant on Teakettle bench. Site had previously been investigated by Anaconda men. In October 1950 Harvey switched to Rose Crossing, six miles north of Kalispell.

Nov. 5, 1951 - Anaconda Copper Mining Co. announced purchase of 95 percent of Harvey's interest. Aug. 30, 1952 - C.F. Kelley, Anaconda chairman, announced ACM would build a \$45 million aluminum reduction plant (this soon became \$65 million) two miles east of Columbia Falls. (*Hungry Horse News* published one page special.)

Sept. 9, 1952 at 9:45 a.m. - First actual land purchase by ACM was from Bernard S. Tracey. Involved were W.C. Rae, ACM general land and tax agent, and Dwight Lohn, Bank of Columbia Falls vice president. Following shortly were purchases of 70 acres from Edward Johnson, 280 from Henry Larkin and 238 from Pat Kel-

here was a battle in itself

ly. First options had been taken by ACM in January 1952. Land involved hadn't supported a single family.

Oct. 1, 1952 - President Harry S. Truman dedicated Hungry Horse Dam. His special train passed plant site with clearing fires the previous night before parking near Columbia Falls Depot. Plant site of 100 acres had clearing started by Wixson Crowe Sept 1.

June 9, 1953 saw plant groundbreaking ceremony with Foley Brothers, Pleasantville, N.Y., general contractors. First aluminum produced Aug. 12, 1955 with dedication Aug. 15. Taking place Aug. 16, 1965 was dedication of third potline boosting metal output from 67,500 to 100,000 tons annually. Completed in 1968

were two more potlines increasing output to 175,000 tons.

The 1985 column concluded: The Flathead prospered with construction payrolls. There were up to 1,600 employed in plant construction. Anaconda Company became an Atlantic Richfield subsidiary Jan. 12, 1977. Completion of \$42.4 million Sumitomo conversion program came in April 1980. Multiple benefits included compliance with State Board of Health emission standards, 15 percent reduction in electricity and improved working conditions.



Mel Ruder photo

Before aluminum plant construction started in 1953 there was the Larkin oat field.